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Putting yourself in the shoes of Raymond Carver

Charles E. May

1 There is usually no mystery about the identity of personal pronouns in the titles of Raymond Carver's stories. The "you" in "Why Don't You Dance," and the "I" in "I Could See the Smallest Things" have clear references to characters in the stories. Even the generalized "We" in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is based on a specific group of characters. However, in "Put Yourself in My Shoes," neither the "you" in "Yourself" nor the "I" in "My" refers to anyone in the story. The only reference to the title in the text is uttered by the character Mr. Morgan, who, after relating an anecdote about a colleague's affair with a student, says to Myers, a character identified as a writer: "Put yourself in the shoes of that eighteen-year-old coed who fell in love with a married man. Think about *her* for a moment, and then you see the possibilities for your story." Lacking any other possible referent, the title seems to be a direct address by which Carver asks the reader to identify with him.

2 This identification is further suggested by Carver's response to an interviewer's question about "Put Yourself in My Shoes": "I think every young writer is cautioned about writing a story about a writer.... But then every writer goes ahead and writes at least one story about a writer, and that's my story about a writer" (*Conversation*s 61). Like most authors, Carver insists that his stories are always a mixture of "a little autobiography and a lot of imagination" (*Conversations* 137). The "little autobiography" component of "Put Yourself in My Shoes," Carver tells us, is that he and his first wife did once rent a house from some people going to Europe. Other particulars of the story – Myers's former job at a publishing house, the Christmas season, the woman who died in front of Mr. and Mrs. Morgan – also have some autobiographical basis, but, as Carver notes about composing stories generally, it is all a matter of piecing things together. "You pull something from here, and you pull something from over here, well, it's like a snowball coming down a hill, it gathers up everything that's in its way – things we've heard, things we've witnessed, things we've experienced. And you stick bits and pieces here and then make some kind of coherent whole out of it" (*Conversations* 127). Carver

claims that when he conceived "Put Yourself in My Shoes" he did not know the guy in it was going to be a writer, that it began with only the one line: "The telephone rang while he was running the vacuum cleaner." Convinced that a story belonged with the sentence, Carver says, "I made the story just as I'd made a poem; one line and then the next, and the next. Pretty soon I could see a story, and I knew it was my story, the one I'd been wanting to write" (*Fires* 17).

3 The basic critical question is: Just what kind of "coherent whole" is "Put Yourself in My Shoes"? Martin Scofield has suggested that the story reveals, through its own form, "Carver's aesthetic, the oblique angle of vision by which he gets through to truth" (268). However, when it comes to establishing what the truth of the story is and how Carver's "oblique angle of vision" gets at it, Scofield, as well as other Carver critics, find the story a problem. Scofield is bothered by the fact that Meyer's "initial surliness" is not accounted for and that his laughter at Mrs. Morgan's story seems "churlish" and not fully motivated. He wonders if there is some "impurity" in the story, something "not fully disinterested" (269).

4 Arthur M. Salzman accounts for the story's puzzling nature by calling it one of Carver's rare satiric stories. He suggests that it may be an indictment of the profession of writing for the offense of voyeurism or "writing as appropriation" (53). Adam Meyer calls it one of the finest and most complex stories in Carver's first collection, but that the central character's lack of empathy calls into question the "appropriateness of his vocation as a writer." He argues that when Morgan tells his final story about the Myers' house-sitting, Myers is "forced to put himself into the other person's shoes, and he does not see much to admire when he looks at himself from that perspective," thus "indicting himself for having a lack of sympathy for his characters" (54-56).

5 The most elaborate attempt to account for the story's strangeness is Randolph Paul Runyon's discussion of what he sees as "an almost incredibly complex narrative." Runyon argues that Morgan's getting the Ys and Zs mixed up in his final tirade is a Freudian slip that reveals his desire to exchange places with Myers, concluding: "If there is anything more likely than an academic wishing he had the writer's freedom and gift for creation, it is a professor wishing he could have an affair with one of his students." Perhaps the most far-fetched theory to account for the metaphor of putting yourself in another's shoes is Runyon's further argument that Morgan wants Myers to identify with the young coed because Myers is the object of his own homosexual desires (43-53). All these readers know that the story has something to do with the nature of empathy or identification, but they assume that the title metaphor refers to a character in the story. I suggest that the title asks the reader to put himself or herself in the shoes of Raymond Carver as he transforms the events into a short story.

6 The story begins with a man running a vacuum cleaner when the phone rings with an invitation to get out of his "ivory tower and back in the real world for a while." However, as Henry James so complexly explores it in his famous story, "The Real Thing," the "real" world is not the artist's true subject. Mr. Morgan's point of view in Carver's story is much like that of the Monarchs, who argue for the superiority of the "real thing." Morgan believes that what actually happened to actual people is the "real story." He does not understand, as Victor Shklovsky once reminded us, that "the forms of art are explainable by the laws of art; they are not justified by their realism." A "story," as Shklovsky noted, and Boris Tomashevsky reiterated, is merely a description of events, whereas what the writer aims for is a composition of motifs or themes, a

coherent verbal structure with a unifying theme running through it (Shklovsky 57, Tomashevsky 63).

7 From the point of view of the writer's constructive task, the problem is how to convert mere events, one thing after another, into significance. From the perspective of the writer's relationship to the reader, the problem is – once the reader is encouraged to keep turning pages to find out what happens next – to find some way to make the reader see that what happens next is not what is most important. The central problem, says C. S. Lewis, is that for stories to be stories, they must be a series of events; yet at the same time it must be understood that this series is only a net to catch something else. And this "something else," which, for want of a better word, we call theme, is something "that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or quality" (91). The result is that the means of fiction are always at war with its end.

8 Lewis says, "In real life, as in a story, something must happen. That is just the trouble. We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the state is never quite embodied" (91). E. M. Forster has called attention to the same paradox in a famous mock lament in *Aspects of the Novel,* reminding us that even as we agree that the "fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect," we voice our assent sadly: "Yes – oh, dear, yes – the novel tells a story." Both Forster and Lewis agree that the problem lies in the sense of time. Forster notes that in addition to the time sense in daily life there is something else, something not measured by minutes or hours, but by intensity, something called value. Story, qua story, however can only deal with the time sense. Story, the "naked worm of time," is an atavistic form which presents an appearance both "unlovely and dull," says Forster (41).

9 This basic incompatibility is even more obvious in the short story, which, in its frequent focus on a frozen moment, seems atemporal. As Julio Cortázar has noted, "The short-story writer knows that he can't proceed cumulatively, that time is not his ally. His only solution is to work vertically, heading up or down in literary space" (247). Georg Lukács has argued that whereas the novel gives us the totality of life by its contents, the short story does this only formally (*Theory of the Novel* 51). Characterizing this distinction as the difference between the techniques of narration and description, Lukács further notes that in description (the primary technique of the realistic novel) events are only loosely related to the plot and could be eliminated, whereas in the short form, events constitute a stylistically patterned relationship to the central focus of the story. Description provides no true poetry of things, he continues; objects "come to life poetically" only to the extent that they are structurally related to human life in the texture of the story (*Writer and Critic* 137). And indeed, as Chekhov recognized when he criticized one writer's works for lacking the "compactness that makes short things alive," in the short story "life" means "poetic life," not the ordinary life of everyday experience (197).

10 Walter Benjamin makes a similar distinction between primal storytelling and the information-based novel, claiming that whereas storytelling always had a validity that required no external verification, information must be accessible to immediate verification. When stories come to us through information, they are already loaded down with explanation, says Benjamin; it is half the art of storytelling to be free from information (89). According to Benjamin, although realistic narrative forms such as the novel focus on the relatively limited areas of human experience that indeed can be

encompassed by information, characters in stories encounter those most basic mysteries of human experience that cannot be explained by rational means.

11 A striking example of the difference between the "life" inherent in the short story at its most typical and the "life" inherent in fiction when information begins to dominate can be seen in the two versions of Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home." What gives the shorter version its life is the basic, mysterious and unarticulated reaction the wife makes to the image of the dead girl. The second version is made longer by the drive toward explanation of what the discovery of the dead girl means – a drive that becomes so pervasive that the narrator makes explicit expository assertions: "Two things are certain: 1) people no longer care what happens to other people; and 2) nothing makes any difference any longer." The sense of life in the longer version is more reassuring, more filled with information than the shorter version, less fraught with mystery, less dependent on the pattern of the story and more dependent on simple explanation. What Lukács calls stylistically patterned form, typical of Carver's early stories, results in what Benjamin calls the cryptic, elliptical mysteries of human experience that cannot be explained by rational means.

12 The result of the short story's tight formal patterning is the strange sense felt in Carver's early stories that reality seems both real and unreal at once. Larry McCaffery has caught the seeming contradiction best. "To be inside a Raymond Carver story is a bit like standing in a model kitchen at Sears – you experience a weird feeling of disjuncture that comes from being in a place where things *appear* to be real and familiar, but where a closer look shows that the turkey is papier-mâché, the broccoli is rubber, and the frilly curtains cover a blank wall" (62). However, it is just this dependence on poetic patterning that has frequently caused critics such as John Aldridge to equate the lack of information in the work of Raymond Carver, Mary Robison, and other contemporary short story writers, with a lack of "significance." Applying critical approaches derived from the novel to the short story, critics such as Aldridge are then quick to dismiss the form for being unable to focus significantly on what they think is meaningful in human experience.

13 It is unfortunate that an understanding of the short story in American criticism has been inextricably linked to that influential interpretive maneuver known as Formalism, which has come under fire for being naive and non-theoretical. However, as José Ortega y Gasset has reminded us, a work of art lives on its form, not on its material. "Perception of 'lived' reality and perception of artistic form...are essentially incompatible.... " (23). And Umberto Eco has insisted, "the formal analysis of a work's structural mechanics...does not lead one to treat the work as *an end in itself*...but serves to provide the instruments by which to understand the relations between work, cultural context and the personality of the writer.... the formal approach is the sole way of correctly clarifying relationships between the work and the world of other values" (142). More recently, William H. Gass has reminded us that the artist's "fundamental loyalty must be to form, and his energy employed in the activity of making. Every other diddly desire," says Gass, "can find expression; every crackpot idea or local obsession, every bias and graciousness and mark of malice, may have an hour; but it must never be allowed to carry the day" (35).

14 One indication that "Put Yourself in My Shoes" asks the reader to identify with the formal writerly process by which a story is created, rather than the readerly process of identifying with anecdote and as-if-real characters, is that other fiction writers seem

most aware of the story's centrality for understanding Carver's attitude toward his work. Jay McInerney once said, "'Put Yourself in My Shoes' is very much what Ray said fiction is all about... "When I first read the story, I felt the menace of it. Like much of his work, it has an edge of darkness. But when I heard Ray read it, what came through was the humor.... It was remarkable in the way you felt impelled to laugh at some of the most awkward moments. I think he liked that and thought it was not an inappropriate response to his work" (47-48). Indeed, "Put Yourself in My Shoes" is a writer's "in joke," a story about the difference between what real writers and non-writers see as the most important aspect of their work. For example, it is hard to say why Mr. Morgan thinks it would take a Tolstoy to tell the anecdote about his colleague's affair with a co-ed, but Carver admires Tolstoy, mainly because Tolstoy rewrote *War and Peace* five times from "stem to stern with pen and ink" and was making corrections in the galley proofs right up to publication. The "real work" on a story, Carver says, begins, not with its anecdotal basis, but when the crafting of the individual sentences starts. It was not uncommon, Carver has said, for him to do ten or twenty drafts of a story.

15 Haruki Murakami, who has translated all of Carver's works into Japanese, offers the most striking example of another writer identifying with his writing process:

> "As I translate what Ray has written, I can sense line by line the rhythm of his breathing, the warmth of his body, and the subtle wavering of his emotions. I can sense the feelings he experienced when writing certain lines. It is truly an extraordinary experience. Of course, you can probably get this kind of pleasure even from just reading his books. That is, after all, the sign of great fiction. But there are times when I am translating, painstakingly transforming one word after another into Japanese, that I sometimes feel just as though I have become one – body and soul – with the author. Through his words I can sense clearly the sadness or joy he experienced at the moment of writing them. Instead of translation, I prefer to call this 'experiencing Raymond Carver.' And there is nothing that can substitute for this experience. " (131).

16 Murakami's way of "experiencing Raymond Carver" seems particularly relevant to the story "Put Yourself in My Shoes." He has noted that Jay McInerney once suggested that the opening line of his own story "The Windup Bird and Tuesday's Women," in which a man gets a phone call from a mysterious woman while boiling noodles, is similar to the first line of Carver's "Put Yourself in My Shoes." "It is possible," says Murakami in response to this observation, "that I have absorbed the rhythm of Ray's phrasing and something like his view of the world much more deeply than I had suspected" (132).

17 As Carver has insisted, the "real story" of a story, as opposed to what non-writers like Mr. Morgan assume, lies in the actual process of creating a "coherent whole," not in the mere events that provided the initial impetus to the creation of that whole. In other words, Myers understands the crucial Russian Formalist distinction between "story" and "plot," while Mr. Morgan does not: "Real incidents, not fictionalized by the author, may make a story. A plot is wholly an artistic creation" (Tomashevsky 68). One source of confusion about this distinction is the fact that "Put Yourself in My Shoes" ends with Myers driving away in silence because "He was at the very end of a story." However, in an interview Carver has said this story is about a man who is not writing, but by the end is ready to write. The question that this seeming contradiction raises is: How can Myers be both at the end of a story and its beginning? The answer may be that the personal pronoun "he" in the final sentence refers to that character who has been brought into being by the constructive process of Carver's writing the story. At the end,

Carver/Myers is ready to begin the process by which he will proceed through the story until, as a created character, he will be at the end of the story in the final sentence.

18 The primary pattern of motifs that develops this process is established in the first section of the story by contrasting Myers with characters who are not writers. Myers has quit his job to become a writer, as opposed to Dick, a man in the office who has always talked of becoming a writer, which he, in romantic Hemingway fashion, associates with going to Paris. Ignorant of the hard work of writing, Dick tells Paula to tell Myers to get out of his "ivory tower and back into the real world." When Paula tells him the "horrible news" about Larry Gudinas committing suicide by shooting himself in the mouth and expresses her puzzlement by saying, "Can you imagine, Myers?" Myers does indeed put himself in the shoes of the man. "He could imagine the jolt, the head snapping back." On his drive to meet Paula, Myers looks at the people on the sidewalks, the gray sky, and the tall buildings. "He tried to see everything, save it for later." However, as Carver once noted, the short story writer is not interested in "things" as mere bits of detail but rather in transforming them into significant parts of an artistic coherent whole. "It is possible," Carver has written, "in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power" (*Fires* 15). Near the end of "Put Yourself in My Shoes," when Myers sees that the events and people around him are material for a story, he comes alive for the first time.

19 Since Mr. Morgan is the primary representative of the non-writerly response to the world, it seems inevitable that the two men are very early established as doppelgänger figures.[1]When Myers sees the Morgan house with its lighted windows, snow on the roof, and the station wagon in the driveway, he makes one of his rare reactions to the world in the first part of the story: "something took him." Since Myers has previously lived in the house, what "took him" is his awareness that someone else is occupying the same space he once occupied. (Of course, we learn later that what Mr. Morgan is upset about is the way Myers occupied his space while he was in Europe.) After the dog rushes at Myers, making him fall, Morgan observes Myers closely and says, "I saw it. I was looking out the window when it happened." This remark seems "odd" to Myers, and he then looks closely at Morgan. That this identification of Morgan and Myers is crucial to the "sense of mystery" of something happening "beneath the surface" is further suggested by the several repetitions of Morgan and Myers focusing on each other. Frequently in the story, Myers catches Morgan staring at him, and several times Myers seems to be the only one who is aware of Morgan slamming cupboard doors and cursing in the kitchen when he goes to get them drinks.

20 As soon as Paula tells the Morgans that Myers is a writer, Morgan recounts his "horrible story" about his colleague's affair with a coed, much as Paula told Myers "horrible news" at the beginning about the suicide of Larry Gudinas. Morgan makes the usual mistake of the non-writer by assuming that all it takes to make a fiction is an anecdote, what the Russian Formalists call a "story." He is unaware, as Tomashevsky notes, that the "aesthetic function of the plot is precisely the bringing of an arrangement of motifs to the attention of the reader, not simply recounting real incidents" (68). After finishing the story, Morgan again meaningfully gazes at Myers; however, while Mrs. Morgan and Paula call the event "disgusting" and "horrible," Myers simply grins and says nothing. Although Mrs. Morgan thinks of how the wife

must feel and Paula tries to imagine what the boy must be going through, Mr. Morgan says, "But here's something I don't think any of you has thought through. Think about *this* for a moment. Mr. Myers, are you listening? Tell me what you think of this. Put yourself in the shoes of that eighteen-year-old coed who fell in love with a married man. Think about *her* for a moment, and then you see the possibilities for your story." He then pompously proclaims, "It would take a Tolstoy to tell it and tell it *right*.... No less than a Tolstoy." Abruptly, Myers says, "Time to go" and stands up. There is no clear motivation for this reaction except the fact that Myers is a writer and knows about the demands of the writing process which Tolstoy and other writers, including himself, must meet to create a story.

21 The second narrative is introduced when Mrs. Morgan says that because Myers is a writer she wants him to hear the story about Mrs. Attenborough. Myers, not wanting to hear still another story, once again tries to leave. However, Mrs. Morgan, in a clear statement of her failure to understand the writing process, says to Paula, "This is your chance to see how your husband's mind goes to work on raw material." Because Myers knows he is the only one in the room who understands how a writer's mind works on raw material to create a story, he tries to change the subject by saying, "That dog almost tore my leg off." This, in turn, sets in play another dialogue about writers, Mrs. Morgan commenting on how writers exaggerate, Mr. Morgan responding with a cliché about "the power of the pen and all that," and Mrs. Morgan twisting the chestnut by saying, "Bend your pen into a plowshare."

22 When Morgan says that his wife will tell the story, Myers once again gets up to leave. And at this point, the exchange gets heated:

> "You tell it, dear. And Mr. Myers, you listen closely," Mrs. Morgan said.
> "We have to go," Myers said. "Paula, let's go."
> "Talk about honesty," Mrs. Morgan said.
> "Let's talk about it," Myers said. Then he said, "Paula, are you coming?"
> "I want you to hear this story," Morgan said, raising his voice. "You will insult Mrs. Morgan, you will insult us both, if you don't listen to this story." Morgan clenched his pipe.

23 Mrs. Morgan then tells the anecdote about leaving her purse in a ladies' room at a museum in Munich and a well-dressed woman with white hair returning it to her and then dying in their living room. When she says, "Fate sent her to die on the couch in our living room in Germany," Myers can no longer restrain his scorn for the Morgans' lack of knowledge about what the writer does and laughs helplessly.

24 Mr. Morgan then challenges Myers, "If you were a real writer, as you say you are, Mr. Myers, you would not laugh.... You would not dare laugh! You would try to understand. You would plumb the depths of that poor soul's heart and try to understand. But you are no writer, sir!" As Myers continues to giggle, Morgan slams his fist on the coffee table and declares, "The real story lies right here, in this house, this very living room, and it's time it was told!" Morgan, using anonymity conventions of the nineteenth-century novel, then tells his convoluted story about a couple occupying another couple's house while they are living in Germany for a year. However, he becomes so angry during his fictionalized account of the Myers' transgressions that he gets confused. Although he begins identifying the Myers as Mr. and Mrs. Z and himself and his wife as Mr. and Mrs. Y, by the end of his rant he has reversed the anonymous designations, making the Zs the aggrieved party. While there is no mistaking who did what to whom in reality, it is not clear who is in whose shoes in Morgan's amateurish

account. This makes Morgan's insistence that his own story is the "real story" all the more hilarious to Myers, for he knows that Morgan has no idea what a "real story" is.

25 Myers is now happy for the first time in the story, having been given a wonderful Christmas gift by the Morgans – not any of the anecdotes they have told him, but rather this encounter between a writer and people who have no idea of what the writer does. Myers knows, as Ortega says, that the artist is never content merely to duplicate reality, but rather must repudiate reality by placing himself above it. "Being an artist means ceasing to take seriously that very serious person we are when we are not an artist" (45). As they drive away and Paula says, "Those people are crazy," Myers pats her hand and does not answer. "Her voice seemed to come to him from a great distance. He kept driving. Snow rushed at the windshield. He was silent and watched the road. He was at the very end of a story." Although Myers the character is at the very end of an event, Carver the writer is at the very beginning of the making of a coherent artistic whole. To put yourself in the shoes of Raymond Carver is, as Haruki Murakami says, to participate in the process of the creation of the work. "That is, after all, the sign of great fiction."

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NOTES

1. As a side note here, William Kittredge says he remembers a book in Carver's library, marked up and scribbled all over – a college textbook on double stories, e.g. Dostoevsky's "The Double" and a story by Henry James (probably "The Jolly Corner"). "One of the things that struck me about those stories," says Kittredge, "was the way they were like Ray's. Sort of put yourself in my shoes or try my blindness" (30).

RÉSUMÉS

Raymond Carver's self-confessed "story of a writer," "Put Yourself in My Shoes," asks the reader to identify with the formal writerly process by which a story is created, rather than the readerly process of identifying with anecdote and as-if-real characters. As Carver has insisted, the "real story" of a story – as opposed to what non-writers like Mr. Morgan assume – lies in the actual process of creating a "coherent whole," not in the mere events that provided the initial impetus to the creation of that whole. Although at the end of the story, Myers the character is at the conclusion of an event, Carver the writer is at the very beginning of the making of a coherent artistic whole. To put yourself in the shoes of Raymond Carver is to participate in the process of the creation of the work.

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